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SUBJECT: U/SYG HOLMES BRIEFS MEMBERS OF THE SECURITY  
COUNCIL ON SRI LANKA

**¶1.** (SBU) Summary: On March 26, U/SYG for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes briefed members of the Security Council on the situation in northern Sri Lanka. He said the situation there was worsening and civilian casualties remained "tragically and unacceptably high." The "informal interactive discussion" was not officially a meeting of the Security Council, due to Chinese, Russian and Vietnamese objections. The Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka attended and defended his government's actions, saying that the military had intentionally slowed down its advance in order to safeguard civilians. All Council members were present and called for full respect of international humanitarian law. Some - including France, UK, U.S., Mexico, Austria, Croatia, Costa Rica and U/SYG Holmes - called on both sides to agree to a humanitarian pause, while others - Russia, China, Vietnam and Japan - focused their attention only on the actions of the LTTE. End summary.

U/SYG HOLMES BRIEFS

**¶2.** (SBU) Holmes began by saying the humanitarian situation in northern Sri Lanka deteriorated further after his briefing to the Council on February 27. The LTTE have rejected calls to release civilians from their diminishing area of control, and have stepped up forced recruitment. The government estimates less than 70,000 civilians remain in the area, while the UN estimates the trapped civilian population between 150,000 and 190,000. Holmes said civilian casualties remain "tragically and unacceptably high" and said several dozen civilians are killed each day. He urged the government to refrain from firing heavy weapon into no-fire zones. Regarding those trapped in LTTE-controlled territory, Holmes said the risks of disease and malnutrition were increasing, and those supplies that entered via the only available sea route option were insufficient to the need. Although the ICRC is working to evacuate trapped civilians, the demand for evacuation exceeds capacity.

**¶3.** (SBU) Turning to those civilians who had left the LTTE-occupied area, Holmes urged that they be treated according to the norms of international humanitarian law. He noted continued UN concern regarding the transit camps (lack of freedom of movement for the IDPs, lack of information for family members and a continued military presence within the camps), as well as the pre-screening and screening areas. These latter areas remain a key focus of concern because of the lack of humanitarian access, and because of widespread rumors of disappearances and families being split up. In concluding remarks, Holmes said it would be "very valuable" to have a humanitarian pause, and called on the international community to look for ways to convince the LTTE to lay down their weapons and allow for humanitarian access to the trapped population. He also urged the government to show a credible commitment to minority rights and the decentralization of power.

## SRI LANKA RESPONDS

¶4. (SBU) Sri Lankan PR Palihakkara said the military could overrun LTTE within days, but had decided not to do so because of its concern regarding civilian casualties. He categorically denied that the military was firing heavy weapons into the no-fire zone, but then admitted that this may have occurred because of a response to LTTE firing from the no-fire zone. Regarding access of international humanitarian workers, Palihakkara said the government did not have any difficulty with this from a policy perspective, but logistical problems remained. He said Sri Lanka was working to increase humanitarian access and to increase the supply of medicine and food into the affected zone. Palihakkara said the LTTE was looking for a ceasefire in order to rearm, although he expressed openness regarding the modalities a brief no-fire period. He concluded by saying the Sri Lankan government understood that there was no military solution to this conflict. It was precisely for this reason that the President launched an initiative to discuss devolution and minority rights.

## COUNCIL MEMBERS REACT

¶5. (SBU) Council members all called for respect of international humanitarian law and condemned the actions of the LTTE. China, Japan, Russia and Vietnam focused exclusively on the LTTE and did not press the government to do more regarding civilian casualties. China, Russia and Vietnam expressly noted that the meeting was not an official Security Council meeting, and Sri Lanka was not on the agenda of the Security Council. They emphasized the informal nature of the meeting.

¶6. (SBU) France, UK, Croatia, Austria, U.S., Mexico and Costa Rica all called for a humanitarian pause. While they all acknowledged the right of the government to deal with the terrorist threat of the LTTE, they also noted the government's obligation to protect civilian life and to fully comply with all international obligations regarding the protection of civilians. France and Mexico added that the Security Council should continue to monitor the situation closely. The U.S., France and Austria expressed particular concern regarding the reported firing of heavy weapons by the government into no-fire zones. All Council members thanked the Secretary-General and U/SYG Holmes for their continued action on this issue, and noted the importance of a political process in order to achieve a durable resolution to this conflict.

Wolff